

Rules of the Game

All About Trip Attacks (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Sometimes a foe (or unruly ally) becomes much easier to handle when lying on the ground. Fortunately, the rules provide a method for knocking creatures off their feet -- the trip special attack.

Tripping usually doesn't pose many problems in play; however, tripping involves an opposed roll. Tripping also involves a few modifiers not typically used in combat. The rules for trip attacks can prove complex enough to give anyone pause from time to time. This series considers the theory behind the trip attack, examines the process used to resolve trip attacks, and considers a few variations on the trip attack.

For more on tripping, you might also consult the recent Tactics & Tips [Sibling Rivalry column](#).

Some Terminology

Here are a few key terms used in this series.

Attack of Opportunity: A melee attack that a creature makes during another creature's turn when a foe does something to provoke it. See pages 137-138 in the *Player's Handbook* and [Rules of the Game: All About Attacks of Opportunity](#) for details.

From page 135 of the *Player's Handbook*:

ATTACKS OF OPPORTUNITY

During combat, you threaten all squares adjacent to yours, even when it's not your turn. An opponent that takes certain actions while in a threatened square provokes an attack of opportunity from you. An attack of opportunity is a free melee attack that does not use up any of your actions. You can make one attack of opportunity per round. Actions that provoke attacks of opportunity include moving (except as noted below), casting a spell, and attacking with a ranged weapon.

You provoke an attack of opportunity when you move out of a threatened square, except:

- If you withdraw (a full-round action), opponents don't get attacks of opportunity when you move from your initial square. If you move into another threatened square, however, opponents get attacks of opportunity when you leave that square.
- If your entire move for the round is 5 feet (a 5-foot step), opponents don't get attacks of opportunity when you move.

Opposed Check: A check whose success or failure depends on another check, usually from a foe. The two check results are compared, and the higher check result wins the opposed check. If the two check results are tied, the character with the higher check modifier wins the opposed check. If both the check modifiers are tied as well, reroll to resolve the opposed check. Continue rerolling as often as you must to determine who wins the opposed check.

Prone: A creature lying on the ground is prone. When prone, you cannot make **ranged attacks** with weapons (except for crossbows) and you suffer a -4 **penalty** on melee attacks. If you're attacked while prone, you gain a +4 bonus to **Armor Class** against ranged attacks but take a -4 penalty to Armor Class against **melee attacks**. See Part Two for more notes about being prone.

TRIP

You can try to trip an opponent as an unarmed melee attack. You can only trip an opponent who is one size category larger than you, the same size, or smaller.

Making a Trip Attack: Make an unarmed melee touch attack against your target. This provokes an attack of opportunity from your target as normal for unarmed attacks.

If your attack succeeds, make a Strength check opposed by the defender's Dexterity or Strength check (whichever ability score has the higher modifier). A combatant gets a +4 bonus for every size category he is larger than Medium or a -4 penalty for every size category he is smaller than Medium. The defender gets a +4 bonus on his check if he has more than two legs or is otherwise more stable than a normal humanoid (such as a dwarf). If you win, you trip the defender. If you lose, the defender may immediately react and make a Strength check opposed by your Dexterity or Strength check to try to trip you.

Avoiding Attacks of Opportunity: If you have the Improved Trip feat, or if you are tripping with a weapon (see below), you don't provoke an attack of opportunity for making a trip attack.

Being Tripped (Prone): A tripped character is prone (see Table 8-6: Armor Class Modifiers). Standing up is a move action.

Tripping a Mounted Opponent: You may make a trip attack against a mounted opponent. The defender may make a Ride check in place of his Dexterity or Strength check. If you succeed, you pull the rider from his mount.

Tripping with a Weapon: Some weapons, including the spiked chain, dire flail, heavy flail, light flail, guisarme, halberd, and whip, can be used to make trip attacks. In this case, you make a melee touch attack with the weapon instead of an unarmed melee touch attack, and you don't provoke an attack of opportunity. If you are tripped during your own trip attempt, you can drop the weapon to avoid being tripped.

Tripping Basics

The rules don't spend much time explaining what a trip attack looks like in the game world. Fortunately, it's not too difficult to read what the rules have to say about trip attacks and form a picture from that.

You can make a trip attack against any corporeal creature that is standing more or less upright (more about this in Part Two) whether that creature is moving or standing still. A trip attack starts like a grapple attack -- you attempt to physically attack your foe with an unarmed **melee touch attack**. Instead of trying to hold on, however, you try to push or pull your foe off his feet and make him fall down. You also can use a trip attack to pull a foe off a mount.



In older versions of the game, what we call a trip attack now was called an overbearing attack. The term "overbear," however, implies that you tackle your foe and fall to the ground with him, and that's not the case with a trip attack. You remain upright even if your trip attack succeeds in forcing your foe prone.

Here's an overview of the rules for tripping:

- You make a trip attack in lieu of a melee attack.

You can trip using the attack **action** or using the full attack action. You also can make a trip attack as an attack of opportunity.

If you use the full attack action to trip a foe and your **base attack bonus** allows you to make multiple attacks during your turn, you can use the extra attacks to beat up the foe you've just tripped. If you do that, your foe's reduced Armor Class (from being prone) is a benefit for you. (You also can use your extra attacks against other foes if you want.)

If you have the Improved Trip feat, you can immediately make a free melee attack against a foe you have tripped.

- You can attempt a trip attack against a foe one **size** category bigger than you, the same size as you, or smaller than you.

You can't trip a foe two or more size categories bigger than you -- you just can't force a creature that much bigger than you off its feet.

- You begin a trip attack with an unarmed melee touch attack.

The rules don't come right out and say it, but you use your melee touch attack to get a purchase on your foe (so you can throw, push, or pull him down). The melee touch attack provokes an attack of opportunity from your foe.

If you wield the right kind of weapon, you can use it for the touch attack and avoid the attack of opportunity.

If you have the Improved Trip feat, a melee touch attack you make to trip a foe doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity.

Curiously enough, your trip attack isn't spoiled if the attack of opportunity you provoke when you initiate the attack deals you damage (as it does if you attempt to grapple a foe; see page 156 in the *Player's Handbook*). Resolve the attack of opportunity (if any) you provoke before completing your trip attack. If you're still alive and conscious after the attack of opportunity, you can proceed to the next step.

- After you've made a successful melee touch attack, you make an opposed **Strength** check to pull (or push) your foe off his feet.

Your foe resists your Strength check with either a Strength check or a **Dexterity** check (whichever gives the foe a higher modifier for the opposed check).

The check you make as the attacker is part of the action you used to make the trip attack. The check the defender makes isn't an action for the defender.

Several modifiers apply to the opposed check you make to resolve a trip attack. Size has a big effect on trip attacks. (The bigger creatures can force other creatures off their feet more easily and also have an easier time resisting attempts to force them down.) Each combatant gains a +4 bonus for each size category he is larger than **Medium** and a -4 penalty for each size category smaller than Medium. Part Two includes a table that summarizes size modifiers for trip attacks.

A defender (only) with more than four legs gains a +4 bonus on opposed checks to avoid being tripped. Some creatures, such as dwarves, are more stable than other bipeds and gain a +4 bonus to resist being tripped while standing on the ground (see the dwarf race entry in the *Player's Handbook*).

- If you attempt to trip a foe and win the ensuing opposed check, you dump your foe to the ground.

Your foe falls to the ground and winds up prone. If you've pulled your foe down from a height (as you might if you've tripped a climber or rider), the foe might take some falling damage.

- If you attempt to trip a foe and lose the ensuing opposed check, your foe gets a free attempt to trip you.

Your foe is not required to make a trip attempt against you. If he chooses to make the attempt, that's not an action for your foe. The foe does not make a touch attack to trip you, and the attempt does not provoke an attack of opportunity from you.

The checks the two of you make to resolve the trip attempt aren't actions for either of you.

The rules don't say so, but it's best if you don't allow the original attacker another trip attempt if the defender's reactive trip attempt fails.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll wrap up our look at trip attacks by considering a few ancillary topics, including the promised table of size modifiers.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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